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SUBJECT: ANALYZING THE CIVIL UNREST -- THE ISLAMIC FACTOR

REF: A. (A) PARIS 7682 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)B. (B) EMBASSY PARIS DAILY REPORT FOR OCTOBER 28 -  
NOVEMBER 16 (PARIS SIPRNET SITE)

[1](#)C. (C) PARIS 7527

Classified By: Pol/MC Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: The perpetrators of the urban rampaging (refs) in France are by and large of Arab-African and Black-African background. In most cases, they are also Muslims, raising the question as to what extent their religious affiliation helps explain the explosion in France's immigrant suburbs. There is widespread agreement that unemployment and lack of education, and not religious affiliation, are the primary factors underlying the angry hopelessness of urban youth. That said, responsible commentators on the situation -- from officials who monitor potential support for terrorist activities to rights activists with long experience working in troubled neighborhoods -- see religious affiliation as a complicating factor. Thus far most of the youths in question, while happening to be Muslim by culture, are generally not viewed as individually inspired by Islam, just as Islamic political groupings are generally not viewed as being directly behind the violence. Observers note, however, that these groups have not hesitated to try to exploit the unrest for their own purposes, just as extremist and nativist politicians on the far-right have played to racism and xenophobic fears. The government's decision to turn to Muslim leaders to quell the unrest is itself seen by some as misdirected and a bad precedent, in contradiction with the French republic's strict secularism. In sum, while efforts to politicize the unrest are seen as unsuccessful to date, there is concern that not "getting it right" in dealing with the problems of France's underclass Muslims could eventually produce the very Islamic extremism identity that (almost) no one wants. End summary.

No direct links to Islamic extremism

[1](#)2. (C) Though it has carefully watched for it, the French Government has not discerned any significant link between Islamic extremism and the recent unrest. As Christophe Chaboud, head of the Ministry of Interior's counter-terrorism coordination body (known by its French acronym - UCLAT), categorically reconfirmed to PolOff on November 15, "we (the GoF) have not found any link between Islamic extremists and those fomenting the unrest. He acknowledged that police and internal intelligence organizations have received "a few" signs that some Islamic extremists have participated in the violence. That said, he believed that they were acting as individuals and not as members of a coordinated, Islamic group.

Fears of extremist and criminal exploitation

[1](#)3. (C) Chaboud reported that GoF monitoring of websites and blogs (in France and abroad) nonetheless reveals that extremists are trying to exploit the unrest to their advantage, claiming (for example) that it results from GOF attempts to control and muzzle Islam in France. Asked whether there was any connection between organized criminal gangs and Islamic extremists in exploiting the unrest, Chaboud said those in the "revolt movement" were, at most, only petty criminals. Indeed, police are quoted in press as observing that where organized crime is strongest is often where there has been, counter to conventional expectations, little unrest, presumably because drug-selling organizations view burning cars as bad for business. (See also ref C for the views of a investigating judge on the connection between criminality and current unrest.)

Just hoodlums?

[1](#)4. (SBU) Samira Cadasse, vice-president of a leading women's rights group that focuses on empowering women in poor

immigrant communities, told PolOff that the small groups of youths responsible for car burnings and police taunting are the same ones who "hold hostage" suburban housing projects throughout France. Cadasse's NGO -- "Ni Putes Ni Soumises (NPNS -- translated literally as "Neither Whores nor Submissives") focuses on the difficulties poor, often Muslim women of immigrant background face in resisting discrimination from French society as well as oppression within their own cultural traditions. Cadasse said NPNS has tried to highlight for years the way frustrated, angry, aimless young men in poor neighborhoods, under the blind eye of French authorities, visit their powerlessness first and foremost on their female relatives.  
Or "Islamic" hoodlums?  
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15. (SBU) Contrary to much of the media reporting, Cadasse said she definitely also perceived an Islamist element behind some of the violence. Exclaiming that, "we all know who these guys are," she claimed they had shaved their (Islamic) beards in order to spread violence. These unemployed Islamist youths were the same troublemakers who had sought to repress women in the troubled suburban neighborhoods. She also believed it significant that there were no girls among the troublemakers. That said, while Cadasse clearly believed that the misapplication of tenets some attribute to Islam abets the widespread oppression of women in these immigrant communities, she stopped well short of calling the "big brothers" committed Islamist fundamentalists.

No role models or jobs  
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16. (SBU) Cadasse identified lack of jobs as the real root of the problem, which was compounded by the relative generosity of the social safety net. As a result, young men sat idle at home, while receiving a generous -- but ultimately insufficient and humiliating -- 950-euro stipend from the government. They could not afford to move away from their parents, but at the same time accepted no parental control. She did not think it accurate to portray these youths as victims; these young men were guilty of arson and other crimes and should be punished. At the same time, she thought it would be difficult to break the vicious cycle. Cadasse saw the current crisis -- due to larger failures and shortfalls in education, employment opportunities and housing -- as very difficult to resolve, and doubted that the government had the will to go beyond the "Band-Aid" solutions employed in the past.

30 years of "ghettoization"  
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17. (SBU) According to Cadasse, the government's history of treating only the symptoms rather than the causes of minority unemployment and social exclusion, and its failure to curb a thirty-year ghettoization trend among French immigrant communities, "has been an error" of governments of both left and right. Cadasse was pessimistic about the prospects of bettering the circumstances of France's immigrants of Arab background. She said that overall, "we're no better off than 22 years ago" -- at the time of the "march of the beurs" -- a turning point in North African immigrant activism. While she did not envision a "Marshall plan" for France's inner-city-like suburbs, she believed that "drastic measures" were necessary nonetheless. PM de Villepin's pledge to reverse the budget cuts to associations (like NPNS) and to offer a range of other social program enhancements was a positive start. Government funding was also critical for secular NGOs like NPNS to combat the influence of Islamists. But she doubted the government had the will to stay the course. In her view, it was too tempting for the government to focus on security in an attempt to appeal to far-right-leaning voters in the upcoming presidential election.

18. (SBU) Comment: French NGOs are largely dependent on government support, and typically receive 80 percent or more of their funding from the state. These associations are essential to holding together the social fabric of poor neighborhoods, providing everything from food kitchens to tutoring to psychological support activities. Soon after President Chirac's re-election in 2002, the state financing of these associations was cut severely. Prime Minister Villepin last week promised to restore the cuts. The government appears to understand that diminishing the viability of these secular, state-funded charitable organization risks a vacuum that could be filled by home grown, Islamist self-help organizations. End Comment.

GOF guilty of using religion?  
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19. (SBU) Interestingly, some see the government itself as guilty to some degree of having violated the principle of secularism it holds so dear. In a meeting with the rector of

the Grand Mosque of Lyon on November 15, one Muslim religious leader's criticized the government for violating France's strict separation of the religious and the public. The Rector, Kamel Kabtane, took to task the government's effort to use Muslim religious figures to calm the situation in troubled neighborhoods. Kabtane said that many of his fellow-clerics were also ambivalent about the French government's call on religious leaders to "do the work of the government and security forces." "If farmers started protesting", said the Rector, "the government wouldn't call on the Archbishop to resolve the situation." He warned against attributing a religious dimension to socio-economic problems; there was a risk it could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Better ecumenical than Muslim-only  
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10. (SBU) Kabtane went on to point out that, "the government says that France is a secular state, but then -- when it serves its purposes to do so -- it turns around and calls on religious leaders to solve non-religious problems that the secular state should have been addressing over the last 20-30 years." Kabtane has not issued a statement condemning the violence or calling upon the perpetrators to stop, as he believes it is important not to conflate the actions of violent youths with Islam. If religious leaders are to be involved, he believes it would be preferable to adopt an ecumenical rather than a sectarian approach. To that end, he was organizing a meeting of religious leaders from the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities in Lyon on November 16. His aim was to convince those present to issue a joint statement condemning the violence and calling for it to end.

The risk of an anti-Muslim backlash  
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11. (SBU) Kabtane indicated that he was much more worried about backlash against Muslims following on the recent unrest than about any putative use of the unrest by fundamentalists. On November 12, a Molotov cocktail was thrown over the wall into the Grand Mosque of Lyon. Then on November 13, someone threw a Molotov cocktail over the wall of a mosque in Saint-Chamond (a town near Lyon). Kabtane said that Muslims were paying the price for the fact that French politicians -- and foreign media -- have blamed the violence on "Muslims" and "immigrants" instead of on "unemployed" or "underprivileged" youths. (Comment: We have now heard reports of a handful of such attacks against mosques. In all likelihood, they were perpetrated by right-wing, anti-immigrant nativists. End Comment.) Kabtane added that he was satisfied with the demonstrations of support he had received from French authorities in the wake of the attack on the mosque. The local prefect visited the site the following morning, and Interior Minister Sarkozy had telephoned Kabtane to offer support.

The French school system as the key  
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12. (SBU) During a public affairs talk show on the evening of November 13, conservative philosopher Alain Finkelkraut addressed how "the Republic" could reclaim the troubled, inner-city-like neighborhoods "lost" to both law and order and social integration. Finkelkraut poetically evoked his experience in France's public school system, stressing its role in separating youths from surrounding society in order better to inculcate the values that underpin the "Republican ideal" of equal citizenship blind to race, nationality, religion and social class. Finkelkraut lamented the way "society had invaded the schools," bringing with it a raft of demands, identities, exceptions and resentments that, taken together, interfered with the inculcation of a shared national identity. In Finkelkraut's view, taking back the neighborhoods for "Republican" law and order was the lesser half of the battle. Providing, to those most removed from the possibility of it, the convictions and opportunities required for successfully integrating into French society was the more difficult, and most urgent challenge, facing France today.

Otherwise sectarianism could follow  
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13. (SBU) Finkelkraut warned that failure to meet this challenge would inevitably open the door to the ascendancy of separate, alternative identities focused on religion. Controversial Islamic activist Tarik Ramadan, who also participated in the round-table discussion, indirectly confirmed as much. Turning around the image of "the Republic needing to take back the neighborhoods", Ramadan, unctuously, but deftly, argued for the right of "the neighborhoods" -- their cultures, identities, religion, etc. -- to "take the Republic."

The French fear of "communitarism"

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14. (SBU) Former Prime Minister Alain Juppe -- spending a semester teaching in Canada -- posted a long piece to his blog ([www.alljup.com](http://www.alljup.com)) that clearly identified "Islam in France," specifically "radical Islam," as a factor also "responsible" for the current unrest. In Juppe's view, "French Islam's" refusal -- so far -- to "solemnly proclaim" its acceptance of the "separation of the temporal from the spiritual" and its recognition of "non-negotiable, universal human rights" (including gender equality) contributes to the difficulty of integrating those who live in the neighborhoods where radical Islam presents itself as an alternative model for social organization.

Comment

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15. (SBU) The gangs of underclass youths who are the perpetrators of the car burnings and urban violence in France are not Islamists, nor are they at all motivated by religion. It is highly misleading to characterize them -- as is often done in media coverage -- as "insurgent" and "Muslim" youths. The anger felt by these youths stems from how they are trapped and without a future -- facing pervasive racial prejudice, and without the skills and education needed to get-a-life of employment and conventional respect.

16. (SBU) That said, the dominant religion in France's low-income housing projects affected by the recent violence is Islam, and there are those intent on "saving" these communities from their social ills by re-founding them on religious, as opposed to secular, principles, in effect filling the vacuum where French republican values have failed to take root. Whether or not Islamic organizations and fundamentalist proselytizing will make significant inroads among the inhabitants of France's immigrant suburbs of course depends on the effectiveness of the GOF's social programs and the willingness of French society at large to face up to its pervasive prejudices against Blacks and Arabs.

Please visit Paris' Classified Website at:  
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/paris/index.cfm>

Stapleton